'It is nothing'

Mortally wounded, the Austro-Hungarian Archduke, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, Sophie, lay slumped on the back seat of their car, a 1911 Gräf & Stift convertible, as they were driven back to the Konak, the governor's residence in Sarajevo. It was Sunday, 28 June 1914, and the royal visit to Bosnia had ended in disaster. Franz Ferdinand had been shot in the neck at close range, his blood spraying onto the face of his driver, while a second shot had pierced Sophie's abdomen. Major von Hüttenbrenner, the senior medical officer in the official party, attended to the royal couple as soon as they had been carried to safety. Sophie was already dead, her body limp and her white silk dress stained with a dark, seeping patch of blood. The Archduke was unconscious, his breathing shallow, with blood trickling from his neck and mouth. Count Morsey, his long-serving valet, cut open Franz Ferdinand's blue tunic to ease his chest, but it did no good. Within a matter of minutes, shortly after eleven o'clock that morning, he was dead.

The murderer was a 19-year-old Bosnian Serb, Gavrilo Princip. A sickly, thin-faced youth, Princip was a member of a secret militant organization, *Ujedinjenje ili Smrt* (Union or Death), sometimes known as the Black Hand, which was sworn to fight for a greater Serbia. After being smuggled across the border with six other conspirators, he was given a pistol and a bomb and told to position himself along the route that the Archduke would travel and strike if an opportunity presented itself. The plot had been orchestrated from Belgrade by the head of Serbian military intelligence, Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević. When Dimitrijević heard about the royal visit to Bosnia, he was insistent that Franz Ferdinand must die. Not only was the Archduke the heir to the imperial throne, he was also a moderate and a reformer, whose stated desire to create a new kind of federal empire would have rendered the possibility of a greater Serbia far more unlikely. Franz Ferdinand believed that rising political tensions within Vienna's sprawling empire could only be dampened by more reform, by spreading power downwards. This meant revisiting the terms of the *Ausgleich* of 1867, which had created the Dual Monarchy of Austria and Hungary, and turning it into a 'trialist' structure with the addition of a South Slav kingdom – a move that might fatally weaken the appeal of an enlarged Serbia. As Princip later revealed, 'he would have prevented, as a future ruler, our union by realizing certain reforms which would evidently have been against our interests'. This was why Franz Ferdinand had to die.[1]

After spending two days out on manoeuvres in the hills surrounding Sarajevo, Franz Ferdinand had been on his way to a reception with local dignitaries at the City Hall. The first attack came as his car was passing the Ćumurija Bridge, which lay along the Appel Quay, a pleasant street running beside the Miljâcka river through the centre of the city, about 650 yards from his destination. A 'tall young man in a long black coat', a Bosnian Serb called Nedeljko Čabrinović, saw the car, lit the fuse on his bomb and hurled it. Franz Ferdinand's driver immediately spotted the assailant and slammed his foot down on the accelerator, which meant that the bomb bounced off the back hood of the car, hit the pavement and rolled under the following vehicle, detonating with a sickening explosion. Although the royal couple were unharmed, two attendants were wounded, cut by shrapnel, and their vehicle was wrecked. Čabrinović had jumped over the wall down onto the riverbed, which had sunk to a trickle in the summer months, and was chased by police officers, who seized him shortly afterwards, the bomb-thrower coughing and spluttering after taking a cyanide pill, which seared his throat but did not kill him.[2]

Within minutes the motorcade had reached the City Hall, where the royal party were ushered inside. Clutching his speaker's notes, now spattered with blood, Franz Ferdinand gave a short address before meeting with officials, including the Governor of Bosnia, General Oskar Potiorek, who was responsible for the royal family's security. The Archduke wanted to visit the wounded attendants, who were being ferried to the garrison hospital, so it was agreed that he would return by a new, quicker route, straight down the Appel Quay, instead of following the original plan, which would have had the motorcade turning right at the Latin Bridge down the narrow Franz Joseph Street. Unfortunately, no one seemed to have told the Archduke's driver, so instead of continuing along the main road, he followed the original route, slowing down and then turning right past the Moritz Schiller Spice Emporium. As he did so, Potiorek realized the mistake and turned to him:

'What is this? Stop! You are going the wrong way! We ought to go via Appel Quay.'

The Archduke's car was only motionless for a few, precious moments, but it was enough for Princip to earn his place in the pantheon of Serbian national heroes. After Čabrinović's bomb attack, Princip had drifted through the crowds, assuming that the assassination attempt had failed, and ended up in Franz Joseph Street. Suddenly realizing that his target was now right in front of him, he acted without thinking, raising his pistol and firing two shots at point-blank range. For a split second there was only a stunned stillness, broken by the sound of the shots echoing off the street walls. Then Princip was seized by the Archduke's bodyguards and hurled to the ground. Count Franz Harrach, who had been standing on the left-hand side of the car on the running board, noticed how Sophie had sunk down in her seat and Franz Ferdinand now began to dip forward, causing Harrach to ask whether His Highness was in great pain. 'His face was slightly distorted, and he repeated six or seven times, every time losing more consciousness and with a fading voice: "It is nothing."' Then the Archduke was silent, the only sound being 'a convulsive rattle in his throat' caused by blood loss. 'This ceased on arrival at the governor's residence. The two unconscious bodies were carried into the building where their death was soon established.'[3]

Austria–Hungary would react, but how exactly remained to be decided.- While spontaneous anti-Serb pogroms broke out across the empire, the government was quickly recalled in Vienna. Austrian Prime Minister Karl Stürgkh, Chief of the General Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, Foreign Minister Count Leopold von

Berchtold and his deputy, Count Alexander Hoyos, were all convinced that Austria had to take a strong line, using the opportunity to strike down her foremost opponent in the Balkans. The only note of caution came from the Hungarian Prime Minister, Count István Tisza. 'We have no sufficient grounds for holding Serbia responsible', he told Emperor Franz Joseph several days after the shooting. Forcing matters 'would be a fatal mistake' for 'we should appear before the world as the disturber of the peace and would kindle the fires of a great war in the most unfavourable conditions'.[4]

Germany's position would be crucial. Despite fighting each other in 1866, the Austrian and Prussian (now German) Empires had drawn closer over subsequent decades. They were now part of the Triple Alliance – comprising Austria, Germany and Italy – which was originally signed in May 1882. This 'essentially conservative and defensive' alliance committed the signatories to mutual 'peace and friendship' and promised that none would enter into an 'alliance or engagement directed against any one of their States'. Moreover, were France to attack Italy, Germany and Austria would be 'bound to lend help and assistance with all their forces'.[5] Although Italy was decidedly nervous about taking part in a war in defence of Habsburg interests in the Balkans, and would remain neutral in July 1914, Germany had declared privately that Austria had her full support. Germany's Kaiser, Wilhelm II, regarded the assassination as an act that could not go unpunished and told his officials that it was 'high time that a clean sweep was made of the Serbs'. What is more, when Vienna's envoy, Count Hoyos, arrived in Berlin on 5 July, he was told that Germany would support Austria even in the event of a war with Russia; a prospect that did not strike the Kaiser as being particularly likely.[6]

Germany's declaration of unconditional support hardened the hearts of those in Vienna who pushed for a decisive confrontation with Belgrade. Although the Kaiser was under the impression that Austria was preparing for an immediate attack, it took weeks before she was ready. Habsburg troops from rural areas were traditionally allowed to go home during the summer months for the harvest, and with large sections of the army not due to return until 25 July, significant military action before that date was impossible. A council of war was held on 7 July, at which the Habsburg ministers repeated their demands for a firm stance. Any diplomatic manoeuvres 'should happen with a firm intention of concluding the whole affair with war'. Moreover, 'far-reaching demands should be made to Serbia, acceptance of which must be regarded as out of the question, so that a radical solution by means of military intervention can be set in motion'. Tisza again set out his objections and insisted that there must be an opportunity for Serbia to avoid hostilities. The following day, still deeply troubled at the pace of events, he wrote to Franz Joseph and warned him that a war with Serbia would 'in all conscience provoke Russian intervention and thus world war'.[7]

Tisza's refusal to be pushed into a war in the Balkans was now the chief stumbling block to Austrian action. Count Berchtold was a firm believer in a military solution and kept up the pressure on the Hungarian premier throughout the following week, assuring him of German support and muttering darkly about the disastrous consequences of disappointing the Kaiser. A week later, on 14 July, another council took place and Tisza finally gave way, agreeing that an ultimatum be sent to Belgrade after he was presented with the 'military difficulties' that might arise should action be delayed any further. Tisza had reluctantly dropped his objections, but only on the understanding that apart from making some 'small regulations' of the border, Austria would not annex Serbia (thus avoiding adding more disgruntled Slavs to the empire). 'The text of the note to be sent to Belgrade, as it was settled today,' Berchtold reported to Franz Joseph, 'is such that we must reckon with the probability of war.' The Serbs would have just forty-eight hours to respond.[8]

After being drafted and re-drafted numerous times, the ultimatum was delivered by Baron Wladimir von Giesl, Minister to Serbia, on 23 July. Preliminary investigations had revealed that the assassination of Franz Ferdinand had been planned in Belgrade, with the weapons and explosives supplied by Serbian officers belonging to the *Narodna Odbrana* (National Defence), a nationalist organization with links to *Ujedinjenje ili Smrt*. Therefore, Vienna demanded Serbia issue a proclamation condemning the 'propaganda directed against Austria–Hungary', regretting the involvement of Serbian 'officers and functionaries' in this propaganda and warning that the Royal Serbian Government should 'proceed with the utmost rigour against persons who may be guilty of such machinations'. Ten further demands were made, including the suppression of any publication that incited 'hatred and contempt' against the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the immediate dissolution of the *Narodna Odbrana* and the acceptance of Austrian representatives into Serbia to help suppress the 'subversive movement directed against the territorial integrity of the Monarchy'.[9]

The Serbian response was, initially, one of bewilderment. The Prime Minister, Nikola Pašić, was not in Belgrade but out at Niš, in the south, campaigning for re-election, leaving one of his ministers, Dr Lazar Paču, in charge. When Pašić was found, he immediately returned to the capital and summoned his ministers. According to Paču, the demands were such 'that no Serbian government could agree to them', being inconsistent with the country's sovereignty and honour – a view echoed by Serbia's ruling monarch, Crown Prince Alexander, who sent an urgent message to the Russian Tsar, Nicholas II. Austrian demands were 'unnecessarily humiliating' and 'incompatible with her dignity as an independent State'. With only hours to go before the deadline, Alexander begged the Tsar to help. 'The much appreciated goodwill which your Majesty has so often shown towards us inspires us with the firm belief that once again our appeal to your noble Slav heart will not pass unheeded.'[10]

The mood in Belgrade grew more restive as the hours passed. There were certainly some in the Serbian Government who sympathized with Dimitrijević's pan-Slavic ideology, but the order to kill Franz Ferdinand had not come from the government or the military High Command. Moreover, Serbia was not ready for war. Her army was still recovering from the effects of the Balkan Wars (during which she had expanded south into Macedonia) and there were shortages of everything, from uniforms and ammunition to rolling stock and artillery. While Serbia hoped that the other great powers would be able to pressurize Vienna to back down, work began on drafting a response. Despite the initial tone of defiance, Pašić understood that as many of the demands as possible must be met (or at least not rejected outright). Accordingly, orders were issued for the arrest of several conspirators, and a text, messy and littered with corrections, was finally placed in a diplomatic envelope and given to the Prime Minister, who would deliver it in person to the Austro-Hungarian Legation.

Arriving just before the deadline at six o'clock on the afternoon of 25 July, Pašić handed over his government's formal response, which accepted all but one of Vienna's demands. The Royal Serbian Government was willing 'to hand over for trial any Serbian subject' if evidence was presented of their complicity in the assassination. It would also condemn all propaganda against the Dual Monarchy, dissolve the *Narodna Odbrana* and issue a public statement formally denouncing any attempt to interfere with the 'destiny' of the people of Austria–Hungary. The only point of contention was the Austrian demand to be involved in any official Serbian inquiry. The inclusion of foreign officers in such an investigation would be 'a violation of the Constitution and of the law of criminal procedure', although Belgrade would provide information on any progress to Austrian agents where necessary.[11]

Serbia had gone as far as she could, possibly as far as any independent state could go, but it quickly became clear that anything less than complete submission meant war. Within fifteen minutes of Pašić's arrival, Baron von Giesl informed his hosts that Austria–Hungary had now severed all diplomatic relations and then left, making his way to the station, where he boarded the last train out of Serbia. 'A crowd numbering many hundreds had gathered in the streets; there was no shortage of hostility towards us, but no serious threat ensued', he later remembered. 'The station was cordoned off by troops; the train ready to depart. Everything happened in great haste. A large portion of the diplomatic corps gathered on the platform; I think the Russians, French and Romanians were missing . . . We were urged to get on board. There was a long, discordant whistle, and the train rolled out of the station.' War was now just hours away.[12]

1. 'A visible bloody track'

It was at noon on Tuesday, 28 July 1914, under a bright blue cloudless sky, when Austria–Hungary declared war on Serbia. Shortly afterwards, Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary and King of Bohemia, issued a manifesto to his people explaining why he must 'grasp the sword after long years of peace'. Blaming the Kingdom of Serbia for her ingratitude, 'unrestrained passion' and 'bitterest hate', the Austrian Emperor had now taken a stand against the 'incessant provocations' that had been directed against his empire. 'A series of murderous attacks, an organized, carefully prepared, and well-carried-out conspiracy, whose fruitful success wounded me and my loyal peoples to my heart, forms a visible bloody track of those secret machinations which were operated and directed in Servia [*sic*].' He therefore had no choice but to declare war and trust that his 'peoples', who 'throughout every storm, have always rallied in unity and loyalty round my Throne', would do so again.[1]

Now 83 years old, Emperor Franz Joseph was ailing and fragile. His face was still flanked by the thick white moustache and mutton chops that had become his trademark, but his features wore a more haggard look now, haunted by what he called the 'terrible catastrophe of Sarajevo'.[2] He had endured tragedy throughout his reign (including the suicide of his only son, Rudolf, and the assassination of his beloved wife, Elisabeth) and he took the news of Franz Ferdinand's death with surprising calm, but worries grew as the European situation deteriorated. Closeted with his chief aides at his summer residence at Bad Ischl, Franz Joseph took daily walks around the palace grounds wearing the blue-grey service uniform of a junior officer, comforting himself with the thought that war was inevitable. 'The Almighty permits no challenge!' he had said after hearing the news of Franz Ferdinand's death. '*A higher Power has restored the order that I was unhappily unable to maintain* . . .'[3]

Long gone were the days when a Habsburg emperor would lead the army into war himself. That role would be played by two men: one calm and easy-going, the other hyperactive in his aggression, which seemed to sum up the contradictions of this once-great empire. Three days after Franz Ferdinand had been murdered, Archduke Friedrich, Duke of Teschen, was appointed Supreme Commander at the Austrian High Command, AOK (*Armee Oberkommando*), which was based in Vienna. Fifty-eight-year-old Friedrich was a dutiful and reliable soldier, the kind of royal courtier who could be counted upon for his discretion and loyalty, if not for any notable military expertise. He left day-to-day control of his forces to General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, who had been Chief of the General Staff, with one brief interval, since November 1906. Easily recognizable by his stubby grey hair and white moustache, Conrad was a forceful and confident individual who had carved out a reputation as a notable military thinker – with Friedrich happy for him to take the lead on operational planning.

Austria–Hungary's predicament – which seemed to grow more pressing every year – was that she was surrounded by enemies (Russia, Serbia and Montenegro) or states that were dubious in their intentions (Italy, Romania and Bulgaria) and might, should they get a chance, rush in to feast on her corpse. This was compounded by the growth of surging unsatisfied nationalisms within the empire, from Hungarians and Czechs to Croatians and Serbs, who saw the Dual Monarchy as a roadblock on the way to realizing their own independent national communities. Conscious of the multiple competing threats to the empire, Conrad was convinced that only an uncompromising offensive policy should be adopted, with Austria–Hungary dealing her opponents a series of powerful pre-emptive blows. He had advocated war against Italy in 1907 and Serbia in 1908, and saw the world as a stark and unrelenting struggle for dominance: either the empire destroyed its opponents or its days as a great power were over. The 'duel' against Serbia was not, as he put it, simply about gaining justice for the Archduke, 'it was more a case of the highly practical importance of upholding her status as one of the world's great powers. In fact, this "great power" had been gaining a reputation for weakness over the preceding years, due to its constant acquiescence and forbearance in the face of adversity. This had only served to further embolden its enemies – both foreign and domestic – to the extent that these enemies were taking increasingly drastic measures to bring about the collapse of the old Empire.'[4]

Given these competing threats, it was highly likely that Austria would have to divide her forces in any future conflict. Vienna's war plan, which had undergone numerous revisions since it had first been drafted in 1908, had split her army into three echelons. The largest, *'A' Staffel*, contained 28 infantry and 10 cavalry divisions and would face the Russians along the empire's long northern border in Galicia. The second element was *Minimalgruppe Balkan* – 8 infantry divisions (plus assorted supporting brigades) that would be deployed against Serbia. The final element, *'B' Staffel*, amounted to 12 infantry divisions and a single cavalry division – essentially the rest of the army – and was centrally located so that it could be sent either north or south as the situation demanded. Ideally, *'B' Staffel* would reinforce the Balkan group, providing the superiority in manpower that would almost certainly be required in any campaign against Serbia. If, however, Russia entered the war quickly, then it would have to move north – but transportation experts warned Conrad that given the limitations of the railway network, it could only commence its journey on the eighteenth day after mobilization had been announced.[5]

Beginning in January 1909, Conrad and his opposite number in Berlin, Colonel-General Helmuth von Moltke, had engaged in a detailed correspondence about Austro-German cooperation in a future war. Moltke paid little attention to developments in the east and told Conrad that he should not worry because 'the fate of Austria will be decided not on the Bug, but on the Seine' – meaning that the decisive battles would all be fought in the west. Following the plans developed by Moltke's predecessor, Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Germany would mass her forces against France – Russia's main ally – and destroy her within a matter of weeks. Therefore, Austria–Hungary should not focus on Serbia, but put the bulk of her army in Galicia, mounting an offensive to draw Russian troops away from East Prussia until such time as Moltke could redeploy his own forces.

But forgoing any assault on Serbia while guarding Germany's rear held little appeal in Vienna, and Conrad warned Moltke (in a letter dated 3 March 1909) that he would only be able to take the offensive if the Germans also mounted their own attack from East Prussia – ideally driving south over the Narew river. If such an offensive was not conducted, then Conrad's armies would seek to hold the line of the Carpathians along the San and Dniester rivers.[6]

These disagreements were never satisfactorily resolved, and both Germany and Austria–Hungary entered the Great War with clear ideas about who they wanted to fight but without dealing with the perils and constraints of a two-front war that neither side wanted. Germany's war plan demanded a swift victory against France, while the Austrian High Command hoped that any conflict could be localized to the Balkans – allowing Austria to crush her troublesome neighbour Serbia without interference. But the dwindling chance that Russia would stay out of any conflict vanished on 30 July when the Tsar ordered larger mobilization, turning an Austro-Serbian squabble into a wider European war. Even so, Conrad could not bring himself to abandon the Serbian campaign, which he saw as essential to Austria's reputation and something that could be won cheaply and efficiently. On 30 July, even though Russian intervention was imminent, he met with his chief railway planner, Colonel Johann Straub, and ordered him to send *'B' Staffel* – essentially Second Army – to the Balkans immediately. At the same time he insisted, in a note handed to Count Berchtold, the Foreign Minister, that these deployments proved Austria had no aggressive designs against Russia.[7]

The news that Conrad was still hoping to adhere to a Serbian-only campaign caused a flurry of activity in Berlin, which was still reeling from the news of Russian mobilization. Kaiser Wilhelm II fired off an urgent telegram to Franz Joseph on 31 July warning him that 'it is of utmost importance that Austria deploy her main troops against Russia and does not split them up by a simultaneous offensive against Serbia'. Moreover, 'Serbia's role in this gigantic fight, which we enter shoulder to shoulder, is completely peripheral and only requires the most basic defensive measures.'[8] Conrad still hoped that the Russians could be kept out of the war and was reluctant to mobilize his main

forces in Galicia, but this position soon became untenable. When presented with evidence of Russian movements the following day, 31 July, he finally agreed to the mobilization of *'A' Staffel* (against Russia), while also accepting that *'B' Staffel* would have to return north as soon as space could be found on the railways and once the main deployment to Galicia had been completed.

With Germany concentrating most of her strength in the west, Austria–Hungary would have to face the opening stages of the war virtually alone. Starved of funds for decades and riven by political infighting, the Habsburg Army could only deploy 48 infantry divisions, as opposed to 80 German and 114 Russian ones, with even Serbia managing to put 11 divisions into the field despite having a population one tenth the size of Austria–Hungary's.[9] Although Austrian regiments were well equipped with modern magazine-loading rifles and with machine-guns, and some of her artillery was the best in the world (particularly the 1911 30.5 cm Škoda siege howitzers that would help Germany batter her way through Belgium's fortress network), her line infantry was critically short of artillery, both light and medium pieces. This was in part because of budget restrictions, with funding for weapons programmes being vetoed frequently by the Hungarian Parliament in the years before the war. But it was also a legacy of Austrian tactical doctrine, which remained firmly wedded to the idea that infantry was the decisive arm on the battlefield. The 1911 Infantry Regulations, which were overseen by Conrad, emphasized the spirit of the bayonet and the need for infantry to possess 'iron discipline and superior willpower'. Although recent improvements in artillery were noted, the Austro-Hungarian Army marched into the campaign of 1914 significantly outgunned by the Russians, who could boast 60 guns per division, compared to an average of 42 in Habsburg formations.[10]

Of all the armies that fought in the war, the Austro-Hungarian Army was also the most ethnically and politically fragmented. It was split into three branches, with the regular Imperial and Royal (*Kaiserlich und Königlich*) Army bolstered by the local armed forces of the two halves of the empire, the Austrian *Landwehr* and the Hungarian *Honvéd*; a structure that reflected the complex political reality of

Central Europe, but which did little for cohesion and military effectiveness. For every 100 soldiers in the regular army, there were 25 Germans, 23 Magyars, 13 Czechs, 4 Slovaks, 8 Poles, 8 Ukrainians, 2 Slovenians, 9 Serbo-Croats, 7 Romanians and 1 of Italian ethnicity.[11] The language of command remained German, but this had been the subject of growing complaint, with both Czechs and Hungarians demanding concessions over language use for their own regiments – a move that was strongly resisted by Vienna on the grounds that it would undermine the unity of the regular army.

Notwithstanding the endemic problems within the armed forces, as well as the last-minute confusion over the deployment of '*B' Staffel*, Conrad approached the coming storm with an enormous sense of relief. The war that he had foreseen for many years had finally arrived, and with it the chance to win immortal renown and glory. He believed that whatever deficiencies there were in the army, they could be mitigated by what he called an 'active approach', aimed at seizing and maintaining the initiative. 'In this respect, swift decision-making and strength of will are characteristics crucial to a leader', he had written in 1890, in a study of tactics. 'Such an active approach is likely to surprise the enemy, causing him to dispense with his own plans and forcing him to retaliate. This puts the enemy in a situation for which he is unprepared and for which he has made no plans.' A 'passive' approach, on the contrary, 'occurs all too frequently in war, sometimes for intellectual reasons, sometimes physical, but usually for reasons of morale, and almost always results in failure'.[12]

They had once been firm allies, but by the opening decade of the twentieth century, conflicting designs in the Balkans had brought Austria–Hungary and Russia to the precipice of war. Nicholas II, Tsar of All the Russias, had long distrusted Vienna and had seen her annexation of Bosnia in 1908 as a firm indication that the Habsburgs were intent on dominating the Balkans and excluding Russian influence. When the ultimatum was delivered to Serbia, it provoked fury and disbelief in St Petersburg, as the Tsar and his chief advisers weighed the costs of intervention against the humiliation of allowing Vienna to dismember Russia's chief client state in the region. Despite

an exchange of last-minute letters between the Tsar and his third cousin, the Kaiser, Nicholas saw no alternative but to order mobilization in protest at Austria's actions. 'An ignoble war has been declared upon a weak country', he telegraphed on 29 July, a day after Austria–Hungary had communicated her decision for war on Serbia. 'The indignation in Russia shared fully by me is enormous. I foresee that very soon I shall be overwhelmed by the pressure upon me, and forced to take extreme measures which will lead to war.' He therefore begged Wilhelm to do what he could to restrain the Austrians from advancing against Serbia. The German Emperor, underlining key words as he read the telegram, could only reply with an exasperated 'What?'[13]

Heavy-hearted, suffering agonies of indecision, the Tsar finally ordered full mobilization on 30 July (a partial mobilization having been ordered several days earlier). This was swiftly followed by an ultimatum from Berlin that Russia must cease all military preparations; when this was ignored, a declaration of war came on 1 August. The Russian Army had a peacetime strength of 1.4 million men, bolstered by upwards of three million reservists, so posed a potentially mortal threat to the Central Powers – provided it could concentrate its forces in time. But as with the other belligerents, Russian planners were faced with two possible fronts, north or south – Germany or Austria – and struggled to come up with a plan that would satisfactorily square this circle. Russian attention was naturally drawn to the Balkans, where her interests lay, but the pull of the French alliance, ratified in 1893, committed the Tsar to send between 700,000 and 800,000 men against Germany 'as early as possible . . . in order to force Germany to fight at the same time in the East and in the West'.[14] France kept up pressure on her ally during the frantic July days, with the French President, Raymond Poincaré, leading a three-day state visit to Russia on 20 July, which culminated in a grand military review, involving 70,000 troops drilling in long lines to the thrilling sounds of 'Sambre et Meuse' and 'Marche Lorraine'.[15] By the time the French delegation left, the two powers had coordinated their responses to the developing crisis, with Poincaré stating in his farewell speech that the visit had been 'a splendid consecration of the indissoluble alliance which unites Russia and France on all questions which arise each day before the two Governments and which demand the concerted activity of their diplomacy'.[16]

Russia's dilemma was that while she did not want to fight Germany, having a healthy respect for the prowess of the Kaiser's army, she would probably never get a better chance to do so. With the bulk of Moltke's forces set to march west, the eastern borders of Germany were largely undefended; a point that French soldiers regularly made to their Russian counterparts as they urged them on to Berlin. But Russian commanders were nervous about operating within the Polish Salient, a 230-mile-long stretch of territory west of the Bug, centred on Warsaw, which was vulnerable to counter-attacks from north and south. France had provided Russia with generous loans to fund the upgrading of existing railway lines and the construction of brand-new double tracks that would speed up Russia's mobilization on her western frontier, but Russian and French visions of what a European war entailed remained crucially out of step. By 1912, two variants of Russia's war plan had been drafted: 'A' for a major effort against Austria–Hungary and 'G' for a concentration against Germany. Despite French pressure, Plan 'G' was never Russia's preferred option and remained a largely theoretical exercise, only to come into effect in the unlikely event that Germany chose to attack Russia first. Instead, Plan 'A' would be Russia's 'automatic' deployment, concentrating her main body in Galicia, with a subsidiary force set to invade East Prussia.[17]

Matters were not helped by the factious, feud-driven nature of the Tsar's Cabinet. Nicholas II was a mild-mannered autocrat driven by love and concern for his family, particularly his 10-year-old son, Alexei (who suffered from haemophilia), but he had little experience in military or strategic affairs and relied upon an ever-shifting array of courtiers to advise him. The War Minister, General Vladimir Alexandrovich Sukhomlinov, was perhaps the most notorious of the Tsar's closest advisers. He had fought running battles with other senior officers for years over everything from the role of fortresses in the Russian war plan to the nature of infantry

tactics. He ruthlessly promoted his own protégés to important positions and exiled his opponents to lesser appointments, gaining a reputation as a slippery, untrustworthy character whose only outstanding quality was his unswerving loyalty to the Romanovs and his disdain for the Duma (Russia's Parliament, which had been created in 1905). The French Ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, once remarked that he knew of 'few men' who inspired 'more distrust at first sight' than Sukhomlinov.[18]

The Tsar had originally told his ministers that he would personally lead the army, but suffering a typical spasm of uncertainty, he soon backed down, leaving Sukhomlinov searching for a replacement. Sukhomlinov was himself a decorated field commander, but was unenthusiastic about taking over, perhaps fearing early defeats and wanting to distance himself from them, so on 2 August he approached His Imperial Highness Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich. A towering figure, standing at six feet six inches tall, the Grand Duke possessed a sense of authority and gravitas; of calm, silent determination. As uncle to the Tsar (who called him 'Nicolasha'), he had long been a key figure within the highest reaches of Imperial Russia and was respected for his lifetime of soldiering as well as his prowess as a hunter and as a breeder of particularly aggressive Borzoi dogs. Yet his appointment was a curious one. Although he was known as something of a modernizer within the cavalry, he was unfamiliar with Russia's recent deployment plans and had not commanded armies in the field. 'Words cannot express what I felt at that moment . . .' he later admitted. 'I possessed no right to refuse. I recognized my immense responsibility to the Fatherland, but it was my duty to point out that I felt unprepared and very unsure of what I could do but accomplish this task with confidence and a happy hand. I had no knowledge of the mobilization plan. I would have to carry out a plan I had not designed . . .'[19]

General Headquarters (*Stavka*) had been established in Baranovichi, a barren, dust-swept town about 500 miles southwest of St Petersburg. Chosen because it lay at the junction of three main railway lines (which would allow the Grand Duke's personal train to move up and down the front as required), it lacked amenities and had few buildings suitable for housing the staff required to support Russia's armies in the field. Most of the officers were accommodated in railway carriages, with General Yuri Danilov, Quartermaster-General and, by most accounts, the real driving force at *Stavka*, commandeering the biggest building in town, which housed the office of the military railway brigade, and turning it into the main planning cell. While Danilov worked dutifully on the day-to-day functioning of the army, he was handicapped by the (relatively) small number of staff available to him, just sixty officers, and what he called the 'almost complete absence' of wireless telegraphic equipment. When *Stavka* was formed, it only had a single Hughes telegraph machine to communicate with the front-line commands. This was an early form of teleprinter, first invented in 1855, with a capacity of only 600 words per hour, and it was not until the end of September 1914 that Baranovichi had direct telegraph links to the front headquarters at Rovno and Cholm.[20]

Russia's war plan was to launch two simultaneous attacks, one in East Prussia and the other in Galicia, but instead of waiting until all their forces had been mobilized, Russian commanders were under intense pressure to march hard and strike quickly, particularly while Germany's attention was elsewhere. On 10 August, *Stavka* issued a directive to General Yakov Zhilinsky, commander of the Northwest Front, who would have the task of invading East Prussia. 'According to absolutely reliable information in our possession, Germany has sent her main forces to her western frontier against France, leaving a minority of her forces against us.' It was estimated that only four corps were left in East Prussia, which meant that it was imperative for Russia to move quickly. 'Taking into consideration the fact that Germany first declared war upon us, and that France, as our ally, considered it her duty to give us immediate support and to take the field against Germany, naturally we also, constrained by the same obligations as allies, must support the French . . .' This support would take the form of the 'earliest possible offensive by us against the German forces left in East Prussia', with First Army pushing north of the Masurian Lakes, to turn the enemy's left flank, while Second Army would strike from the south, aiming to cut off the enemy's retreat across the Vistula.[21]

The situation in Galicia was much less certain and would depend upon where the Austrians deployed their main forces. Between 1907 and 1913, Colonel Alfred Redl, a highly placed Austrian intelligence officer, had passed a series of confidential documents to the Russians, giving them an invaluable insight into Habsburg strategic and operational thinking. Redl was finally caught in May 1913 after picking up a secret payment from a post office in Vienna. Special Branch officers trailed him back to his hotel room and then confronted him, handing over a revolver, which Redl used to kill himself an hour later. The Austrian military quickly closed ranks after the 'Redl Affair' became public, keen to downplay the suicide of a valued officer and the devastating effect that his treachery might have on the defence of the empire. Redl had revealed mobilization and war plans for campaigns against Russia, Serbia and Italy, as well as the layouts of key fortifications and detailed orders of battle. He had also betrayed the identities of Austrian agents within Russia, causing a collapse in the vital intelligence that was needed on the empire's adversary.[22]

Armed with this information, the four Russian armies of General Nikolai Ivanov's Southwest Front were ordered to defeat Austro-Hungarian forces and prevent any significant withdrawal of enemy troops either south towards the Dniester or west towards the city of Krakow. On the Russian left around Tarnopol, Third and Eighth Armies would march west towards Lemberg, while Fourth and Fifth Armies, concentrating around Lublin and Cholm, would come down from the north, advancing towards the great fortress of Przemyśl. Together they would crush the Austrian forces in a gigantic pincer movement, recreating the great battle of Cannae (216 BC), when the forces of Carthage crushed those of the Roman Republic in a devastating battle of envelopment.[23] 'I shall order the offensive as soon as the operation is feasible and I shall attack *à fond* . . .' the Grand Duke told the French Ambassador on 5 August, just hours before Austria's formal declaration of war against Russia. 'Perhaps I shan't even wait till the concentration of all my corps is complete. As soon as I feel myself strong enough I shall attack. It will probably be the 14th August.'[24]

As Russian, Austrian and German forces readied themselves for the opening skirmishes, the first shots were being fired in Serbia.

Austro-Hungarian heavy artillery had already bombarded Belgrade on the night of 28 July, firing salvos of shells into the city centre, but it would be another two weeks before the invasion took place, giving the Serbs valuable time to organize their defences while anxiously awaiting the return of their foremost soldier, *Voivode* Radomir Putnik. A national hero who had masterminded Serbia's victories in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, Putnik was now 67 years old and racked by chronic emphysema. After taking the waters at Bad Gleichenberg in Bohemia, he had been apprehended by Habsburg officials on 26 July while changing trains in Budapest, only to be released after an intervention by the Austrian Foreign Ministry. Both Franz Joseph and Conrad agreed to let him go, which allowed him to return home shortly before the campaign got under way. Often seen as a last passing act of chivalry from the old regime, the decision to release Putnik may have been inspired by more calculating reasons – after all, why not let the Serbs be commanded by an old, uneducated peasant rather than by his younger, more energetic subordinates?[25]

Short, bearded, with closely cropped white hair, Putnik was compact and stocky, seeming to personify the doughty character of Serbia, who now girded herself to receive the Austrian attack. With Putnik having to take a long, tortuous route back home (he would not be at his headquarters until the first week of August), his safe, which contained Serbia's mobilization schedules, was cracked open and orders were issued for her three armies – each about the size of an Austrian corps, about 200,000 men in total – to concentrate in a central position south of Belgrade, away from the border, where they could react quickly to any incursion before launching a counter-offensive.[26] Although battle-hardened and fighting on their own soil, Serbian forces had not yet recovered from the heavy demands of the Balkan Wars, and the army looked like a ramshackle band of scarecrows, with first-line officers and men tending to wear the 1908 pattern olive-green tunics and trousers, but second- and third-line formations having to make do with older blue uniforms or going without military outfits entirely. These 'bands of tramps', as one observer put it, 'made excellent soldiers' whose ability to withstand privation was 'marvellous'. 'At night, hundreds of them could be seen sleeping around the depot or on the hard stone pavements of the street, and yet in the morning their activity and fresh appearance would indicate perfect repose. Give the Serbian soldier bread and an onion, and he is satisfied.'[27]

There was no chance that Conrad could lead the Austro-Hungarian campaign against Russia as well as against Serbia, so General Oskar Potiorek, Governor of Bosnia and the man who had been responsible for the safety of the Archduke in Sarajevo, was appointed army group commander of the Balkans, with authority to decide if and when an incursion into the kingdom should take place. There was an urgent need to win an early victory, as much to chastise Serbia as to convince wavering states (Bulgaria and Romania) to throw in their lot with the Central Powers. On 9 August, Conrad warned Potiorek that 'under no circumstances must we suffer a setback in the Balkans' and that success 'would be of the greatest value because it would probably bring the still hesitant states of Bulgaria and Romania to our side'.[28] Three days later, on 12 August, the first Austrian troops crossed into Serbia, bridging the fast-flowing Drina river and striking east into the mountainous, heavily wooded interior in long pike-grey columns. Fifth Army provided the bulk of the invasion force, with Second Army mounting a demonstration along the northern bank of the Danube, intended to confuse enemy observers and draw their attention away from the main attack.

With three armies under his command, Potiorek had numerical superiority, but this would diminish significantly if Second Army – essentially *'B' Staffel* – was ordered away to Galicia, a movement that was scheduled for 18 August. The only option, as he saw it, was to attack as soon as possible while it was still there. 'I intend to be absolutely offensive', he noted on 6 August.[29] Yet nothing seemed to go to plan. Fifth Army should have crossed the Drina in six strong columns, but bridging equipment had not turned up, which meant that only small parties were able to paddle their way across while waiting for pontoons to be hastily assembled. Almost as soon as they had reached the far bank, Potiorek's men began to be plagued by swarms of *Komitadjis* – Serbian partisans and irregulars who harassed Austrian troops wherever they settled, firing a few shots before disappearing into the countryside and frequently causing panic and terror as night fell. The terrain was alternately mountainous or wooded, stony and waterless; even the cornfields posed significant problems, with corn growing so high as to conceal even a mounted rider.[30]

Over the next few days, Habsburg forces advanced cautiously towards their objective of Valjevo (an important rail hub about forty miles from the Drina), skirmishing with locally raised second- and third-line Serbian units. Another bridgehead was thrown over the Sava at Sabac, but Fifth Army had to make its way inland largely unsupported by the other forces available to Potiorek. Sixth Army was deployed further south, guarding the border against Montenegro, while AOK had forbidden General Eduard von Böhm-Ermolli's Second Army from doing anything more than diversionary operations, leaving Fifth Army advancing on its own. It took days for all the invasion forces to cross into Serbia, and the leading regiments soon began to run out of water and food, while eyeing the local population with ill-disguised suspicion. 'This was yet another forced march in searing heat through a sea of dust on the shoddy Serbian roads', noted one Austrian on 15 August. 'To make matters worse, that evening a storm came down, with torrential rain soaking the troops – who were already dripping with sweat – right to the skin. The Serbian villages through which our regiment trekked were almost entirely deserted of their male and female population. The only people to be seen were old folk and children. As we marched past, they stood like sentries . . . clutching little sticks with once-white cloths and handkerchiefs tied to them; or with both hands raised.'[31]

Angered by tales of Serbian barbarity and exhausted by the constant demands of campaigning, Austrian officers and their men soon resorted to fearful atrocities against civilians. Locals would be rounded up and questioned, their houses looted or ransacked. If shots were fired or weapons found, Habsburg units would often carry out summary executions, shooting or bayoneting anyone who was suspected of aiding and abetting the Serbian Army. The informal nature of Serb forces, particularly local militia, who often went without uniform, fostered a belief that the Balkan nation was deliberately

employing guerrilla tactics: dressing their men in civilian clothes to infiltrate Austrian lines and committing the worst excesses against enemy soldiers, including torture and mutilation. The commander of Fifth Army, General Liborius Ritter von Frank, even demanded that AOK 'set aside existing provisions of the Geneva Convention', and although this was denied, the campaign rapidly degenerated into a brutal contest of violence where no quarter was expected and little was given.[32]

At Serbian HQ in Kragujevac, sixty miles southeast of Belgrade, Putnik moved cautiously. Unsure whether the reports of Austrian divisions crossing the Drina indicated the main enemy offensive or just a diversion, he was reluctant to concentrate his armies until the situation became clearer. It was only in the early hours of 15 August that he decided to act, ordering his forces along the border to block the Austrians for as long as possible, while Second Army marched hard from the village of Tekeriš on the slopes of Mount Cer, a heavily forested ridge that rose up to 700 metres in height and formed a crucial objective for any army advancing on Valjevo.[33] Putnik now realized that the main Austrian attack was coming from the west and that any enemy activity in the north was most likely a demonstration, so he decided to fight a decisive battle while he still had time. His troops responded accordingly: one division making a forced march of forty kilometres in a single day to reach their jumping-off positions, the weather alternating between sapping heat and torrential rain.[34]

Habsburg troops reached the top of Mount Cer on the late afternoon of 15 August. The men were exhausted, their patience worn thin by guerrilla activity and having to operate at the end of increasingly tenuous supply lines. That night, amid a terrific thunderstorm, two crack Serbian regiments launched a series of ragged, chaotic attacks. Rushing up the hillsides through the long grass, they shouted that they were Croatians, part of the *Honvéd*, before opening fire and catching the defenders unawares. 'After a quick burst of fire, the Serbs charge . . . in dense lines with loud triumphant cries', recalled an Austrian witness. 'The attack comes too unexpectedly for the troops, for whom this is the first experience of close combat. They into the countryside and frequently causing panic and terror as night fell. The terrain was alternately mountainous or wooded, stony and waterless; even the cornfields posed significant problems, with corn growing so high as to conceal even a mounted rider.[30]

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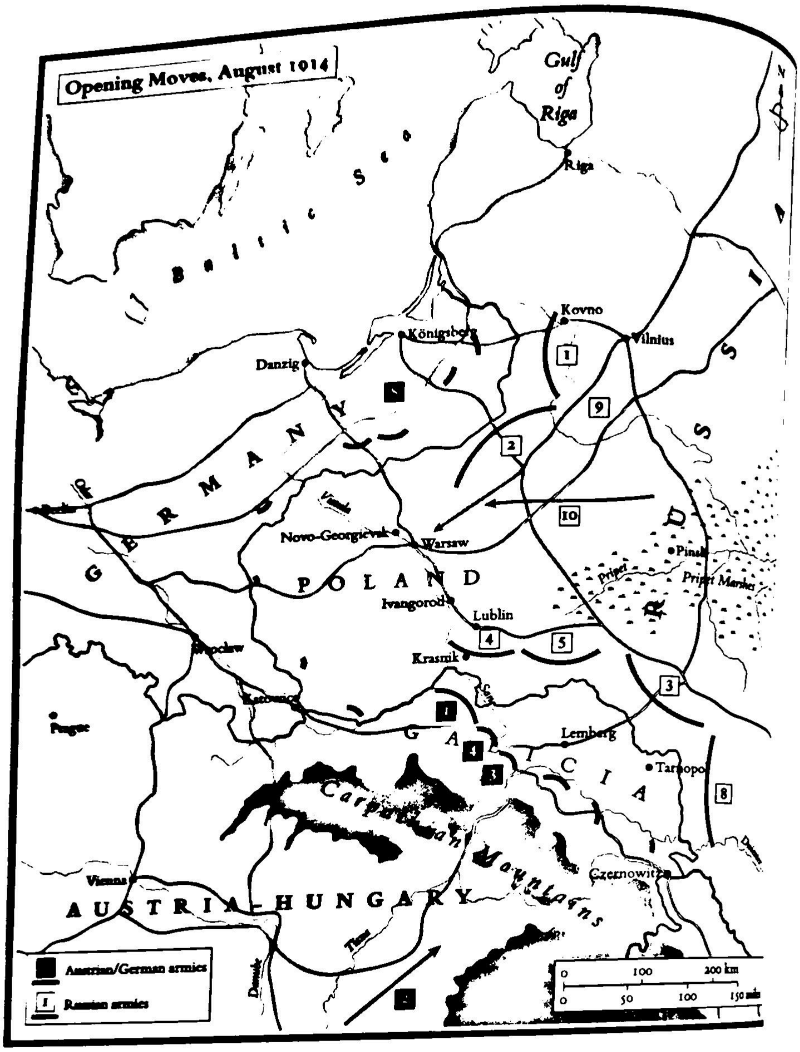
The bulk of the invasion force was evacuated back into Bosnia on the evening of 19 August, and the remaining bridgehead at Sabac was abandoned several days later. In his first, abortive campaign, Potiorek had lost over 600 officers and 22,000 men killed, wounded or captured.[36] On the evening of 20 August, pacing around his headquarters in Sarajevo in a furious black mood, he telegraphed Conrad, pleading with him to sanction another try: 'I consider it my duty to report that, unless all sections of the Second and Sixth armies take immediate offensive action against Serbia in order to compensate as quickly as possible for its triumphs over the Fifth Army, we will likely have to contend with the most objectionable conditions in our Serb-inhabited territories, which would make my assignment extremely difficult.' But Conrad was not interested, forbidding the use of Second Army for further operations in the Balkans: 'The decision lies in the north, where all our strength must be gathered.'[37]

Every day, 7,000 Habsburg railway cars carried hundreds of thousands of troops north, regulars and reservists, to make up three full armies, with another corps-sized group assembling around Lemberg, to be joined by whatever units could be returned from Serbia. Conrad's original plan was for *'A' Staffel* to deploy close to the Russian frontier and then mount an offensive northwards, but following the Redl leaks, he shifted his armies further westwards along the Krakow–Lemberg railway line, with two armies (First and Fourth) mounting an attack between the Vistula and the Bug, which would better aid the Germans, while the rest of his forces provided flanking protection. However, in the opening days of the war, Conrad suddenly wavered and elected to return to his original plan, only to be told by harassed railway staff that this was not possible, meaning that many regiments were dropped off before reaching their final destinations and had to get there on foot.[38]

So they would walk. One reserve officer noted how his battalion marched over twenty miles in the first day after getting off south of Lemberg. This was 'a very strong test of endurance' for his men who, as well as carrying a rifle and bayonet, were burdened with up to 50 lb of equipment: 'a knapsack containing emergency provisions in the form of tinned meats, coffee extract, sugar, salt, rice, and biscuits, together with various tin cooking and eating utensils', alongside another pair of shoes, a winter overcoat and part of a tent. 'Signs of fatigue soon manifested themselves more and more strongly,' he remembered, 'and slowly the men dropped out one by one, from sheer exhaustion.'[39] Ahead of them, Habsburg cavalry rode hard on long reconnaissance missions, crossing the border into Russian Poland with a cheer. There they began to pass through villages of transplanted Russian colonists, 'full of fear and suspicion', as one cavalryman put it. 'Old men with long beards, wearing baggy shirts and pantaloons with heeled, knee-high boots – Tolstoy types. Remarkably pretty, rosy-cheeked girls with long, heavily oiled plaits. The villages are pristine. Brightly painted gabled houses, built with their narrow sides facing the wide village streets, and charming onion-domed churches in the Orthodox style.'[40]

Advanced units, roaming far ahead of their toiling infantry, had already clashed on 21 August at Jaroslawice in what was one of the largest cavalry engagements of the war. Spotting the enemy, an Austrian cavalry division mounted a desperate charge, sabres drawn, in the manner that would have been familiar to their great-grandfathers at Austerlitz or Leipzig in the early nineteenth century. The result was a series of chaotic melees that left the fields covered with dead, wounded, and riderless horses 'mad with fear'. One Russian officer was amazed at the carnage:

> The battle had just ended and the scene on the battlefield was awe-striking. The sun shone dimly from beyond a dark veil of smoke; pillars of restlessly curling dust, intertwined with yellow rays of light, wandered across the field like gloomy shadows. The yellow carpet of


Opening Moves, August 1914

Gulf of Riga
Riga
Baltic Sea
Kovno
Vilnius
Königsberg
Danzig
GERMANY
Berlin
Vistula
Novo-Georgievsk
Warsaw
POLAND
Ivangorod
Lublin
Krasnik
Pinsk
Pripet
Pripet Marshes
RUSSIA
Katowice
Prague
GALICIA
Lemberg
Tarnopol
Czernowitz
Carpathian Mountains
Vienna
AUSTRIA-HUNGARY
Danube
Tisza
1
2
3
4
5
8
9
10
Austrian/German armies
Russian armies
0 100 200 km
0 50 100 150 miles

> freshly harvested wheat was scattered with red and blue poppies and cornflowers – the bodies of killed and wounded Austrians. Among them, though much fewer in number, were daubs of greyish yellow – the bodies of the dead and wounded Russians. Some of the wounded men were moving; struggling to get up, their outstretched hands begging for help . . . The wounds were terrible: especially striking, with regard to the size and gruesome cruelty, were the marks on the bodies of the many dead and wounded Austrians – those were puncture wounds left by lances.[41]

Jaroslawice was an early indication that the war would present new challenges; that it would demand more than just bravery and lust for the offensive. The Habsburg cavalry, like the rest of the army, was badly outdated in its tactics and techniques, rushing into combat with an alacrity that bordered on the reckless. The Austrians had sustained up to a thousand casualties, mostly caused by enemy field guns, which showered the attacking horsemen with shrapnel as they galloped forward. The Russians, on the contrary, had suffered just 150 men killed or wounded – barely a sixth of Austrian losses – leaving them in command of the field.[42]

The struggle in the borderlands would also spring a series of nasty surprises on the Tsar's forces. As Danilov observed, 'All the border skirmishes, despite giving us certain information about the enemy, in no way gave us a definitive picture of its actual strength and grouping . . . Unfortunately, the Air Force was only in the early stages of development, so we had little support to rely upon in that department. We were still entirely dependent on the reports from our agents, as well as on rumours, which had taken various detours on their way to us and were not always reliable.'[43] Although the Russian High Command had been able to read the mobilization plan that had been leaked to them by Redl, they had not anticipated that the Austrians would greatly amend their deployments; after all, the nature of the terrain in Galicia, including the broad-backed range of the Carpathians, which curled away to the south, meant that Habsburg forces would inevitably have to focus their efforts in the northeastern corner of their empire around the city of Lemberg.

However, Conrad's unexpected shift to the left meant that the Russian right wing was badly positioned against the main body of the Habsburg Army, giving the Austrians an initial advantage in the opening battles. On 22 August, General Nikolai Yanushkevich, the Grand Duke's Chief of Staff, notified General Ivanov that they suspected something was wrong: 'It is possible that the Austrians, out of caution, have deployed most of their forces further to the west than we expected, for example in the Krakow-Przemyśl region.'[44]

Ivanov acted quickly, shifting the direction of the northern armies slightly to the west, but by the time he had reported back to *Stavka*, the two great forces had already collided at the village of Krasnik, twenty-five miles southwest of Lublin, just inside the border of Russian Poland. The twenty-third of August was a day of blazing sunshine, of heat hazes that shimmered across a parched landscape of fields and villages, farms and narrow rutted tracks. General Viktor Dankl's First Austro-Hungarian Army was drawn up in a position south of Krasnik, his men resting in woodland after days of hard marching. Dankl could deploy 230,000 men against just over 100,000 Russians, in what was the weakest of Ivanov's armies, giving him a crucial advantage in what followed.[45] Spotting columns of Russian infantry debouching to the south, he ordered his men forward, and over the course of the day, repeated attacks, often relying on sheer weight of numbers and the bayonet, resulted in what seemed like a decisive Austrian victory. 'Russians are fleeing back everywhere', Dankl wrote to his wife. 'Our troops were magnificent . . . The 76 Infantry Regiment charged three times, although half were left behind. The men are unstoppable; they charge at the enemy with unrelenting vigour.' They had captured 5,000 prisoners, three regimental flags, 28 guns and seven machine-guns, and Dankl was hopeful of reaching Lublin in several days' time. But the price of victory had been high. 'Individual battalions have suffered severe losses', he noted; 'even the cavalry has been hit fairly hard. The Russians – as long as they do not outnumber us too heavily – are no match for us.'[46]

Austrian regiments had shown an impressive willingness to go on the offensive, much as Conrad had been demanding, but the shock of battle was brutal. The troops advanced in mass formation, shoulder to shoulder, only to come under heavy bombardment as they tried to close with the enemy. In theory, Austrian divisions could deploy a similar number of field guns to Russian divisions (42 to 48 pieces), but many of these were outdated and in need of a thorough overhaul. For example, the workhorse of the army was the M.5/8 *Feldkanone*, first introduced in 1907, which had to be equipped with 'steel bronze' barrels because of a lack of funds. Not only did this make the guns much heavier, it also reduced their effective range and reliability, with the barrels tending to warp after intensive firing. The army also had severe shortages of modern heavy artillery, with only eight 150 mm howitzers per corps, leaving the Habsburg Army woefully under-gunned.[47]

Russian tactics were, in most cases, as unsubtle as Austrian ones, but there was a greater skill in Russian regiments, an earthy toughness that made them difficult to beat. The Russian Army had learnt much from its ultimately doomed war against Japan in 1904–5, when it had first experienced modern firepower: quick-firing field artillery, magazine rifles and machine-guns. Although the campaign in Manchuria had been lost, with Japanese forces seizing Port Arthur and taking control of the Korean Peninsula, it forced Russia into long-overdue military reforms. By the time war broke out in 1914, Russian infantry could boast much improved musketry, and its artillery had been trained in firing at longer ranges, including indirect fire from covered positions, a skill that most armies in the early stages of the Great War had little or no knowledge of. This quickly became a key advantage in the early battles of manoeuvre.[48]

The Battle of Krasnik was only the beginning of a mighty series of clashes right across the front. On 26 August, the Austrian Fourth Army collided with the Russian Fifth Army at Komarów, sixty miles east of Krasnik. The battle was another bloody engagement, characterized by a kind of desperate fury as both sides hurled themselves forward with all the aggression they could muster. It was as though they wanted to settle the matter quickly, one way or another. Once again Habsburg forces outnumbered their opponents and forced the Russians into a desperate scramble to hold their positions, showing a commitment to the offensive that pleased their army commander, General Moritz von Auffenberg. 'In several encounters, the regiments and battalions marched up swiftly and immediately began to advance, again with the vigour that is so characteristic of our troops, almost leaving themselves without back-up from the batteries, for which the route through the sands and marshes was slow and arduous.' Auffenberg was particularly impressed by the performance of 85 Infantry Regiment (a 'colourful mixture of Hungarians, Romanians, Ruthenians and Slovaks'), which entered battle for the first time since it had been established, 'taking three enemy positions one after the other; charging forth with bayonets and capturing 300 prisoners and four machine guns. That said, 450 men lay dead on the battlefield, and 1,000 wounded had to be brought back. In this one operation, the regiment had lost nearly fifty per cent of its strength, and it cannot be praised enough for the fact that, despite this diminishing its fighting power, its intrinsic value remained intact.'[49]

Over the next four days, Auffenberg continued to feed units into battle, sending them to his left to turn the Russian flank, conscious that time was running out for a decisive battle of envelopment. But there was never enough manpower available, and with Russian units showing a stubborn tenacity in defence – their infantry would dig in at every opportunity – Austrian regiments struggled to make progress. Russian artillery swept them away whenever they tried to close with their positions, leaving them pinned down under murderous fire. 'The unrelenting cannonade turned the battlefield . . . into a living hell', recorded one Habsburg account. 'And the events of those terrible hours exceeded all previously held expectations of the war.' It was little wonder that after being under bombardment for several hours, men would simply get up and try to leave the battlefield.[50]

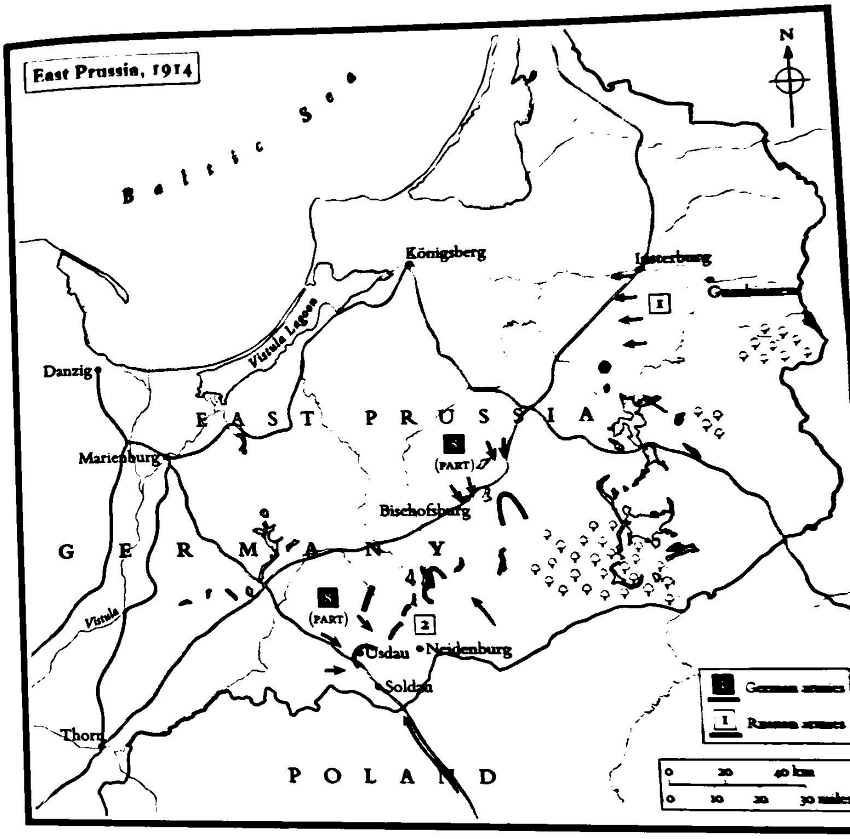
Notwithstanding Russian advantages in firepower, the ferocity of the Austrian attacks meant that by the second day, the Russian line had bent and cracked, with its right flank becoming dangerously exposed. Auffenberg appealed to Conrad to send him troops from Third Army, which lay out to the east, raising the prospect that they would strike the Russian left and complete a double envelopment, but the commander of the Russian Fifth Army, General Pavel Plehve, ordered his army to break contact on 30 August. Habsburg forces tried to follow as quickly as they could, but deepening exhaustion meant that their pursuit was haphazard and slow. 'When marching through the abandoned enemy position,' recorded one regimental history, 'evidence could already be seen of heavy expansion and the skilful installation of flanking systems. Discarded rifles and huge quantities of ammunition had been left behind. The trenches of the Russian reserves were badly polluted; horse carcasses, unburied corpses, items of clothing and supplies lay scattered about. The few prisoners that had been captured were all Poles who appeared to have been taken captive voluntarily.' Losses in Plehve's army amounted to around 30,000 men – about a quarter of its entire strength.[51]

Auffenberg had won a 'half victory' at Komarów; a tantalizing glimpse of what a true battle of encirclement could have looked like in the late summer of 1914. But Plehve's decision to retreat meant that the Russians avoided the fate of being surrounded and destroyed. Auffenberg's forces had captured 20,000 prisoners and 100 guns – an impressive haul – but the cost of doing so had been extortionate. Fourth Army had lost 40,000 men, about 20 per cent of its total strength.[52] Looking back years later, Auffenberg was sanguine about what happened. 'The battle that ensued was an extremely eventful and bloody eight-day struggle. As with any real encounter battle – such as Custoza, for example – attack followed counter-attack and, with the constant arrival of new battle groups, the decision wavered back and forth until – finally – the sum of the individual victories and the compelling power of the idea forced the extremely brave enemy to evacuate the battlefield and make a general retreat.'[53] This was a fair assessment, but newspapers across the empire would soon be emblazoned with reports of the 'complete, brilliant victory' on the northern front, and Auffenberg would later be rewarded with an elevation in status to 'Baron von Komarów' in recognition of his services.[54] In the last days of August, perhaps it was still possible to think that the double-headed eagle, the legendary black and yellow symbol of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, would return with some of its old vigour, having lost nothing in the long years of sad, decaying peace.

2. 'A new and difficult task'

As Austria-Hungary grappled with the main body of the Russian Army, the German garrison of East Prussia was also faced by what seemed like dangerously lopsided odds. General Maximilian von Prittwitz, a white-haired 65-year-old veteran of the Franco-Prussian War, was responsible for the defence of this corner of Germany as commander of Eighth Army, which was deployed in an arc either side of the Masurian Lakes, from Insterburg down to Allenstein and Tannenberg. His task was not easy. With two Russian armies advancing from two different directions, east and south, a strategy of pure defence was not feasible. It was well understood that Germany would have to go onto the offensive at some point, presumably relying upon the Masurian Lakes to separate the enemy forces and strike one army before the other could intervene. But if this could not be done, then they should, as Count Schlieffen had noted as early as 1898, withdraw behind the Vistula river and abandon any attempt at holding East Prussia.[1]

Prittwitz soon began to have doubts whether any offensive plan could work. Fighting had already broken out on 20 August at the village of Gumbinnen after one of his corps had launched a spoiling attack against the advancing Russian First Army, only to be countered and driven back in confusion. 'The fire we opened on the enemy all along the line was so precise and deliberate (and the target was so big!) that the Germans, having suffered huge casualties, had to stop and drop to the ground', recorded a Russian officer. Repeated assaults all failed, 'despite the utter contempt for death displayed by the brave sons of Germany. Many of them were killed here in these open attacks, as they advanced in columns keeping tight formation!'[2] By the early afternoon, the landscape around Gumbinnen was clouded by thick smoke, the air ringing to the clatter of artillery and rifle fire as both sides dug in. Casualties had been heavier than expected: the


East Prussia, 1914
N
Baltic Sea
Königsberg
Insterburg
Gumbinnen
Danzig
Vistula Lagoon
Marienburg
EAST PRUSSIA
GERMANY
Bischofsburg
Usdau
Neidenburg
Soldau
Thorn
Vistula
POLAND
8
(PART)
1
2
3
4
German armies
Russian armies
0 20 40 km
0 10 20 30

Russian 28th Division lost 60 per cent of its fighting strength (about 7,000 officers and men), while the German XVII Corps suffered 8,000 killed, wounded or missing including 200 officers.[3]

With the German attack having stalled, the mood in the Russian camp became increasingly bellicose. They had bested their opponent, showing that they were far from being outmatched on the modern battlefield. The following morning, as Prittwitz's forces slipped away, the commander of the Russian First Army, General Paul Rennenkampf, sent a report on tactics to *Stavka*. As in Galicia, the most noticeable aspect of the campaign so far was the power of modern artillery and its devastating effect against infantry in the open:

> In the battles on 4 and 7 August [OS], the largest number of casualties was caused by the enemy's artillery fire. As expected, it was clear that the Germans were looking to determine the fate of the battle on the flanks as they tried to swoop around them. In the lines, the enemy is deploying strong artillery, even heavy guns, in an attempt to gain an advantage in firepower. What is more, they position their heavy artillery against our flanks, which they intended to bypass. The artillery fire of the Germans is highly effective, which to some extent is explained by the precision of obviously pre-measured distances to certain lines and local objects. That said, as the outcome of the battles and the information from the interrogation of prisoners and wounded enemy soldiers revealed, the firepower of our own artillery is in no way less destructive than that of the Germans, as it inflicts heavy losses and rapidly sweeps asunder all targets in its path . . .

Rennenkampf was confident that all was proceeding to plan. 'It is not that difficult to stop the enemy on the front line', he wrote. Enemy battalions would advance and then go to ground when they came under fire, often refusing to move off again. 'The general impression is that, when the Germans manage to gain the advantage in technical equipment, they hold our troops and cause us great losses. However, I believe that – regarding the art of war and the spirit of morale – the Germans have not exhibited any advantage.'[4]

The mood at General Prittwitz's headquarters could not have been more different, and the sight of German regiments stumbling back from the front was an unnerving spectacle. 'I may now report to Your Imperial and Royal Majesty that the troops have fought with great courage and have hitherto endured all endeavours well', Prittwitz wrote to the Kaiser after Gumbinnen. He admitted that there had been some 'inadequate preparation by artillery', which had led to 'avoidable losses', and noted how Russian guns 'fire extremely well', while their infantry 'take advantage of every opportunity, even skipping rest, in order to dig new positions and trenches'. Worried about the advance of General Alexander Samsonov's Second Army, which was bypassing the Masurian Lakes to the south and threatening to cut Eighth Army off from the rest of Germany, he telephoned the Supreme Command, OHL (*Oberst Heeresleitung*), on the evening of 21 August, warning that he might be forced to abandon East Prussia if reinforcements were not rushed to him. 'The XVII Corps is as good as done', he reported. When Moltke asked what he was going to do, Prittwitz said that he wanted to break off the action. A withdrawal would be 'extremely difficult' – there were 'swarms' of Russian cavalry around – but he thought it could be done.[5]

Such a disconcerting start to the war was certainly not how the German High Command had imagined things might turn out. At almost four million men strong, with a history of victory over Denmark, Austria and France between 1864 and 1871, the German Empire had what was by common consent the strongest army in the world. It was effectively trained and well equipped, whether with its excellent 1888 Gewehr bolt-action rifle or its array of medium and heavy artillery, so much was expected from Berlin's land forces. But with most of the army sent to knock out France, the garrison in the east would have to rely on quick thinking and manoeuvre if it was not to be completely overrun. For Colonel-General Moltke, Germany's Chief of the General Staff, then struggling to coordinate the movement of seven armies in the west, this was precisely what he now feared. His uncle, Helmuth von Moltke the elder, the man who had masterminded many of these great victories, had once said that 'No plan of operations survives the first collision with the main body of the enemy.' This certainly seemed to be true in East Prussia and, accordingly, things would have to change.[6]

Sensing that Prittwitz had lost his nerve, Moltke summoned General Paul von Hindenburg and asked him to take over the defence of East Prussia. At 66 years old, Hindenburg was already retired, but was a capable and careful soldier, not likely to be panicked in a crisis and well regarded enough to have been considered as a possible replacement for Schlieffen in 1906. Moltke also ordered Erich Ludendorff, 17 years Hindenburg's junior, to act as the new Chief of Staff. Ludendorff, who had just taken part in the storming of the Belgian fortress of Liège and was known throughout the army as something of a rising star, was handed a letter on 22 August informing him of his new appointment. 'You have before you a new and difficult task', wrote Moltke. 'I know no other man in whom I have such absolute trust. You may yet be able to save the situation in the East . . . Of course, you will not be made responsible for what has already happened, but with your energy you can prevent the worst from happening.'[7]

All now hinged on the speed with which the Russian Second Army could move. On the maps at *Stavka*, the advance of General Samsonov's forces must have seemed smooth and unassailable, but the supply system it relied upon was already 'disorganized to the point of confusion'. Second Army headquarters had been hurriedly cobbled together from three different military districts, and in its rush to begin the campaign, the army went to war without its proper establishment of field bakeries and transport vehicles. Up to 60 per cent of its manpower consisted of 'newly reported reservists', and there was a disorganized feel to the invasion force as it trudged along the dirt tracks and narrow sandy roads that led towards East Prussia. Because the roads in northern Poland had been kept deliberately poor, to deter German invasion, fast movement was all but impossible. With five corps spread out over sixty miles of front, all heavily wooded and littered with lakes and ponds, Samsonov was forced to rely on wireless radio to send messages; a choice that raised the possibility of interception, but which was judged a risk worth taking in the absence of alternatives.[8]

Such frictions did not impress the commander of the Russian Northwest Front, General Zhilinsky, at his headquarters at Bialystok. Desperate for a quick victory, and assuming that the Germans were in

headlong retreat towards the Vistula, he ordered Samsonov to 'execute a most energetic offensive against the front Sensburg-Allenstein' with the aim of intercepting German units fleeing from Gumbinnen. With only insignificant forces in their way, there must be no additional delays. But in General Samsonov's headquarters, there was only growing disorder and an alarming lack of intelligence. General Postovsky, Samsonov's Chief of Staff, sent a cautious report on 25 August, pointing out the difficulties they were facing. 'Though fully recognizing the necessity for advancing unceasingly and energetically . . . the Army Commander has been forced to make a halt.' He explained that they had been marching for eight days and throughout this period had struggled to provide enough bread for their men, who had to eat their iron rations and live off the land. But Zhilinsky was not interested, and when Second Army requested permission to move its line of march to the west to ward off any potential threat to its flank or rear, he refused, warning darkly that he would not permit Samsonov 'to play the coward'.[9]

Samsonov was right to be cautious. Already Hindenburg and Ludendorff were rapidly redeploying their forces, taking advantage of the dense railway network to move division after division to concentrate against Samsonov, leaving only a thin cavalry screen to ward off Rennenkampf. It was an audacious gamble – the attempt to strike a decisive blow before time ran out – but one that was thoroughly familiar to generations of staff officers who had practised such a possibility in training. It was also attempted with the certainty that little could be expected from Rennenkampf over the next few days. German intelligence had already intercepted numerous wireless messages, including a complete army order, which revealed his line of advance and showed that he would not be close enough to intervene in the forthcoming battle by 26 August.[10] The plan was simple: I Corps would be transported to attack the Russian left at Usdau, while another corps struck on the right at Bischofsburg. Meanwhile, Samsonov's two central corps would be allowed to continue marching north towards their objective of Allenstein. 'We had not merely to win a victory over Samsonoff [*sic*]', Hindenburg wrote years later. 'We had to annihilate him.'[11]

Battle was joined on the morning of 26 August. German regiments went straight into combat, often attacking without artillery support, with morale seemingly unimpaired by the setback at Gumbinnen. 'After the most strenuous forced march,' reported 4 Grenadier Regiment, 'under scorching heat, unbearable dust, excruciating thirst', they had reached their jumping-off point. But before they had had a chance to recuperate, orders were issued to form up immediately. With 'growling stomachs', the men got up and jogged through the 'broken terrain . . . towards the thunder of cannon fire'.[12] With the Russian left under attack, fighting broke out across the entire front, as the centre and then the right wing came under fierce pressure. Still Samsonov's forces kept moving forward, with his centre corps pushing towards Allenstein, hoping that they were driving into the German rear, only to find themselves in a bag that was rapidly being sewn up.

The plan may have been working far better than anyone dared hope, but a sense of unease still lingered over the command team at Eighth Army as the battle unfolded. On the evening of 26 August, Hindenburg and Ludendorff set up their advanced headquarters at Löbau and sifted through the reports that had come in. An intercepted message had revealed the arrival of Russian reinforcements at Soldau, which might have been part of a new corps assembling around Warsaw. Despite wearing a deep frown on his face, Hindenburg remained a stolid, unflappable presence, carefully examining the evidence before him and never overreacting. Ludendorff was more highly strung, worrying constantly about where Rennenkampf was and afraid that they would find themselves outflanked and surrounded. At some point, Ludendorff spoke to Hindenburg alone and they discussed whether they should continue their attack or break it off, with the commander of Eighth Army insisting that they must carry out their plans. The crisis was overcome.[13]

Russian troops fought with their usual stoicism and skill, but too often in a disjointed, uncoordinated manner. Each corps fought its own war, attacking where it could but frequently finding its battalions outflanked or pushed back, with little support from neighbouring units. East Prussia was not Galicia – there were no great open plains where Russian superiority could be easily brought to bear. Here, in the 'hornets' nest' (as it would soon be called), fighting was close and bitter, taking place in small hamlets, villages and dense forests, where the advantage lay with those who knew the ground. Samsonov became so disheartened by his inability to work out what was going on that on 28 August he decided to take personal control. He rode forward to the headquarters of XV Corps at the village of Nadrau, leaving his telegraph equipment behind and sending a short final note to Zhilinsky informing him that he was proceeding 'to take control of the corps in their offensive . . . I shall be temporarily without communication with you.'[14]

From this moment on, darkness rapidly began to overtake Second Army. With the Russian left flank turned at Usdau, German troops took Soldau and then began racing towards Neidenburg, while another corps came down from the north heading for Ortelsburg. Samsonov lacked the aerial reconnaissance that the Germans relied upon, leaving him flailing helplessly. Having been told that there were only the fleeing remnants of one or two corps in front of him, he was now under attack from almost every direction and could see no way out. Instead of executing a rapid withdrawal, his infantry stood their ground and fought with commendable tenacity. Soldiers fixed their bayonets and tried to flush out German positions, only to run into machine-gun fire and shrapnel that decimated their ranks. The Tsar's forces may have outgunned the Austrians, but German units possessed a marked advantage in firepower. Each division could deploy 72 guns, including eighteen powerful 105 mm howitzers. This was further enhanced by sixteen 150 mm howitzers ('the best medium guns in the world'), which were highly effective at demolishing buildings and field fortifications. Russia had planned to begin a major programme of investment in field and heavy artillery in 1915, but the war broke out before it could be implemented, leaving her first-line divisions fielding just six batteries of 76 mm field guns and two six-gun batteries of light guns (60 pieces in total).[15]

And so the net was drawn and the Russian line of retreat severed. By 30 August, three entire Russian corps had been surrounded, and however many times they tried to escape, thin German cordons were able to push them back. Thousands of increasingly desperate Russian soldiers – exhausted, hungry and thirsty – milled around the forests, seeking an escape where none existed, oblivious to the orders of their officers. And then, unit by unit, sometimes in small groups, sometimes in large pockets, they began to surrender, raising white flags and approaching the German lines to seek terms, or simply sitting on the ground, their heads on their knees, waiting for their captors to come. In total, 92,000 Russian soldiers were taken prisoner, including three corps commanders, in what became known as the Battle of Tannenberg.[16] The scale of the losses, particularly of officers, was staggering. In just a single division (1st), the Chief of Staff had been killed, two brigade commanders had died of wounds, three regimental commanders had been wounded and another three killed in action. This was the devastatingly high price paid for the Grand Duke's 'earliest possible offensive' against Germany.[17]

Hindenburg and Ludendorff had achieved what Auffenberg had failed to do at Komarów: complete the encirclement of an army and realize the dream of a modern Cannae. In the early hours of 30 August, the forests echoing to sporadic gunfire, General Samsonov realized that he was trapped. German patrols were everywhere, giving him little chance of escape. He left his personal Cossack guard behind, limped off into a quiet glade and shot himself with his revolver. The only man who could have come to his aid, General Rennenkampf, spent the day responding to a series of confused orders from Zhilinsky. At 7 a.m., a telegram arrived from army group reporting that because of the 'heavy fighting in which the Second Army is engaged', Rennenkampf was to send 'two corps to their support' and move his cavalry 'in the general direction of Allenstein'. This was followed four hours later by a second telegram: 'The Second Army having retreated, the Army Group Commander has given orders to stop the further advance of the two corps pushed forward by you.'[18]

Rennenkampf was not lacking in personal courage, but he had shown little initiative in the opening rounds, certainly not enough to overcome the lethargy inherent in the Russian command system. Instead of ordering the ceaseless pursuit of the enemy, he let them get away. His troops did not restart their advance from Gumbinnen until 23 August, and then moved forward cautiously, scenting danger at every village and from behind every fold of land. But for days they sighted no foe. Rennenkampf reported on 25 August that he had not received any 'new information about the enemy' and that long-distance cavalry patrols had reached the town of Tilsit, with civilians fleeing into Königsberg. There were occasional shots fired at his men, with villages being burnt to the ground in retaliation, even an airship that flew overhead, but the main body of the German Eighth Army was nowhere to be found. The following morning, 26 August, the day the German offensive against Samsonov opened, Rennenkampf was still unsure, reporting that his cavalry 'has not yet discovered the direction of the enemy retreat'. It would all become clear very soon.[19]

News of the destruction of the Russian Second Army produced a wave of depression, mixed with anger, at *Stavka*. After learning of Samsonov's fate, the Grand Duke penned a lengthy telegram to the Tsar on 31 August, taking responsibility for what had happened and blaming the 'catastrophe' on a 'lack of communication' between each corps.[20] Soon afterwards, he travelled to the front headquarters at Bialystok to hear about it for himself. Peter Kondzerovskii, an aide to General Yanushkevich, observed that 'The trip was most unpleasant and the Grand Duke – along with his associates – was awfully low-spirited. Before reaching Bialystok we arrived at a small railway station, where the Grand Duke was met by General Zhilinsky, who immediately entered the Supreme Commander's carriage. The tone of the meeting was almost funereal: everyone spoke in hushed voices . . . The Grand Duke and Zhilinsky talked for an hour or an hour and a half and, after Zhilinsky left, we received the order to withdraw immediately.'[21]

A formal investigation was started, but it did not have to look far to come up with a suitable scapegoat. The army commander's suicide had saved the Grand Duke from a more searching inquiry into the reasons for the disaster: the haste with which the invasion of East Prussia had been undertaken as well as the almost total lack of reconnaissance, combined with supply shortages, which reduced Second Army to a shambolic mess. Zhilinsky's report, penned shortly after the disaster, placed the blame squarely on Samsonov's decision to move nearer the front. Because of this, he removed himself from command at a crucial time, allowing German cavalry to head for Neidenburg and cut off the Russian retreat. 'While the behaviour and orders of General Samsonov, as a commander, deserve severe condemnation, his actions as a warrior have been most valiant; putting himself in great danger, he personally directed the battle under enemy fire, and forfeited his own life out of determination not to endure defeat.'[22]

More pressing was the fact that Poland was now open to invasion. Officers at *Stavka* nervously pored over their maps and noticed that the rear areas of Fourth and Fifth Armies, then engaged in heavy fighting to the south, were vulnerable to attack. As Danilov noted, they had already been warned that as many as seventy German trains were ready to move troops between east and west. 'Given the number of trains required to transport an army corps and the length of time it would take to move an army corps from the Western Front to the Eastern Front, it was not difficult to calculate that no less than an entire army corps was en route, probably even more, and that we could therefore expect the appearance of new troops on our Eastern Front as early as the beginning of September.'[23] The need to win a decisive victory in Galicia was now paramount, with the Grand Duke looking to a new post-war settlement in this region. He had already issued a proclamation to the Poles, telling them that the 'resurrection of the Polish nation' was at hand and that the Russian armies were 'bringing you the glad message of this reconciliation', which would result in a 'reborn' Poland, 'free in her faith, language, and self-government'.[24]

If a reunified greater Poland was to be created, then the Russian Army would have to move quickly, but the advance of the Southwest Front's powerful left wing, Third and Eighth Armies, had been slower than expected, which had caused some frustration at *Stavka*. They had crossed into Galicia on 18 August – Franz Joseph's eighty-fourth birthday – with General Nikolai Ruzski, the commander of Third Army, behaving with 'almost psychotic prudence', worried

that he was facing the main body of the Austrian army.[25] Impatient as ever, the Grand Duke demanded more. On 31 August, he telegraphed General Ivanov: 'In view of a great check in the 2nd Army, and of the necessity of finishing with the Austrians before the arrival from the west of German reinforcements, the Commander-in-Chief has ordered the Armies of the Southwest Front to pass to the most decisive action against the Austrians . . . In those sectors where the situation renders an offensive impossible, the troops must hold their positions to the last man.'[26]

Their objective was the Austro-Hungarian right wing, the weakest part of Conrad's forces. With Böhm-Ermolli's Second Army still straggling in from Serbia, the Habsburg right flank consisted of just Third Army, with another corps, known as the Kövess Group, acting as a flank guard. Although shielded by three rivers and a series of steep valleys, they were dangerously exposed against the combined might of the Russian invaders. Habsburg officials had assessed that significant enemy forces were probably assembling somewhere east of Lemberg, but Conrad paid little attention to this. His focus remained on delivering his offensive with as few distractions as possible. When it was confirmed that Russian cavalry and at least one infantry corps had entered Habsburg territory, he ordered General Rudolf von Bruderman's Third Army to 'deliver a decisive blow' against the enemy approaching from Brody and Tarnopol, and then begin an offensive 'in a northerly direction'.[27]

Bruderman's forces made contact with the Russians along the swampy banks of the Zlota Lipa on 26 August, and it quickly became apparent that he was not dealing with an isolated force, but was now entangled with the main body of the Russian Army, eight corps strong. Urged on by AOK, he ordered his divisions forward, but whereas Dankl and Auffenberg had been able to exploit the element of surprise and make use of their superiority in numbers, Bruderman had no such advantage. Nor could he avoid the problems that had afflicted other Habsburg formations: a lack of artillery support, poor tactical coordination and a reliance on mass infantry attacks. As one regimental history noted:

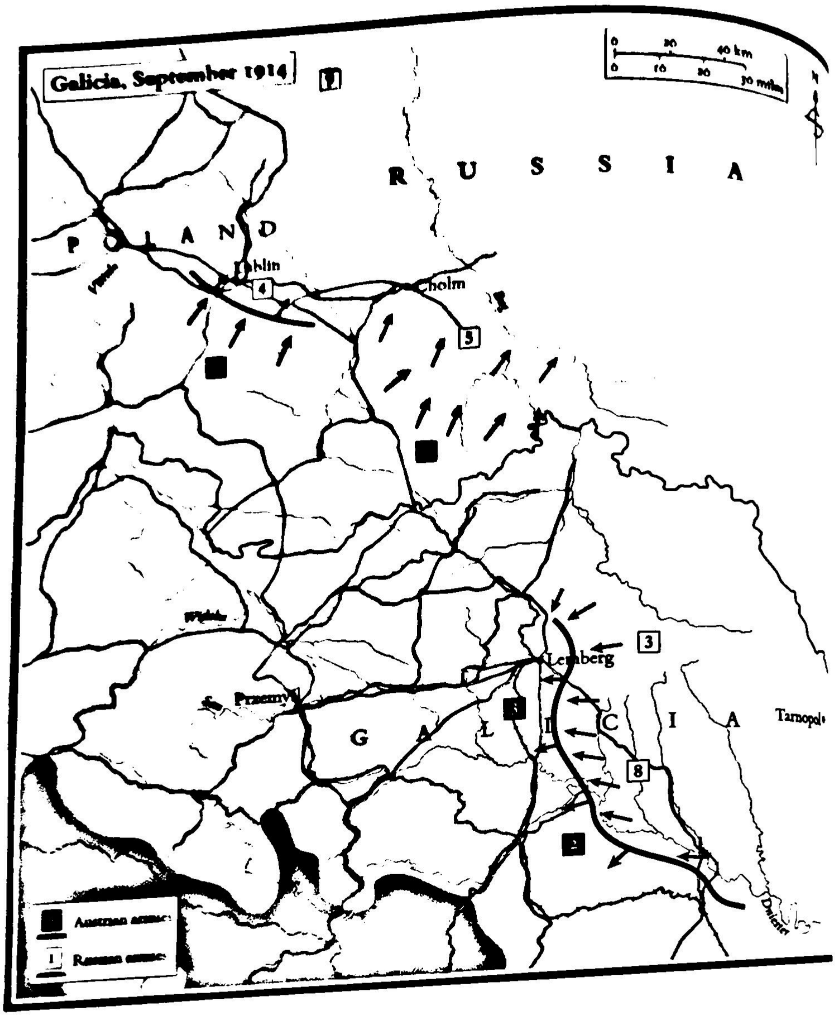
> Those were hard days, and now we have an idea of what fighting and dying really means. Until he has experienced all the intricacies of war with his own eyes, his own body and his own soul, no man could ever truly imagine it: marching through sand and marshland, through these fathomless swampy forests in the searing heat, with no water and often with his stomach groaning in hunger. And then suddenly, as you are plodding along, so tired and bruised and battered, the scene comes alive before you – nobody can say what is happening; the first shots are barking in your ears and the roaring and howling of the shells is getting nearer and nearer. To one side, you hear the crackling of machine-gun fire . . . You taste the battle – a peculiar sour yet bland taste that settles in your mouth. And you feel it, because all your nerves and muscles contract and your brain can think of one thing and one thing only: you have to act.[28]

Habsburg officers did not lack the will to act, but they soon realized that blind courage was not enough. Leading their men into battle, they found that discipline and order broke down quickly under fire, leaving them struggling to keep attacks going. Colonel Rudolf Pfeffer, Bruderman's Chief of Staff, noted how division after division came to a halt under heavy shellfire. 'As long as the enemy artillery fire – which projected dense, explosive clouds of shrapnel onto the horizon in a thick, white line – could not be quelled to some extent by our own artillery, further action was out of the question . . . But the resistance of the enemy infantry was growing greater and greater. Men also began to force their way across trenches and obstacles into the forest itself. Machine guns in trees made their presence felt. The troops were already extremely bewildered.'[29] Faced with imminent disaster, the Third Army commander had no choice but to fall back to another river line, twenty miles to the west, the Gnila Lipa, where he prepared to make another stand.

When he learnt about Bruderman's retreat, Conrad became furious, shouting at an aide that Third Army had failed because it had disobeyed his orders! He relieved Pfeffer of his duties and urgently began shifting his divisions around, plugging gaps where necessary while leaving others wide open. He ordered Auffenberg's Fourth Army to wheel right as soon as it had completed its planned envelopment of Russian forces around Komarów, leaving only token units in place, while marching to the relief of Third Army. The first of September was, he admitted, 'a day of serious crises': 'Will the First Army be able to continue its attack? Will the operation of the Fourth Army really turn out to be a great success and enable support from the Third Army? Will they be able to hold their own at Lemberg, and will the Second Army also be in a position to actively intervene to the right of the Third Army? Those were the questions I was faced with. But however they might play out, I was determined not to give up the struggle, but to press ahead with new resolve at all times.'[30]

Conrad would find that moving armies on the map was easier than doing it on foot. Auffenberg's troops were exhausted by the recent hard marching and fighting, and many regiments had suffered such heavy losses that it took days to properly re-form their companies and reorganize their battalions. Auffenberg kept driving his men on, trying to complete his envelopment, but he had to break off his pursuit on 2 September after receiving a direct order from Archduke Friedrich to turn around and redeploy south as soon as possible. By that point, Third Army had been pushed out of its positions on the Gnila Lipa and Bruderman had ordered his men to occupy defensive positions west of Lemberg, thus abandoning the capital of Galicia. Aware of Conrad's growing unhappiness with his performance, Bruderman tried to remain optimistic: 'The Third and Second Army have slowed a numerically superior enemy in his march west . . . Now Fourth Army is turning to support us in a combined attack on the enemy – the hour for our revenge on this overconfident foe has come!'[31]

But revenge would have to wait. Troops from General Aleksei Brusilov's Eighth Army marched into Lemberg on 3 September, accompanied by music and singing, while the civilian population – those who had not fled – huddled inside their homes. A delegation from the municipal council came out to speak to the Russian commander, who demanded a guarantee of the safety and security of his men. Sixteen civilians were chosen as hostages from each of the main ethnic groups in the city: Poles, Ukrainians, Old Ruthenians and Jews.[32] The capture of such an



important centre was a triumphant moment for *Stavka*, which was still reeling in the aftermath of Tannenberg. Danilov called it 'of extreme political and psychological importance', and admitted that it gave Russia control of 'a whole series of important railway lines and roads leading to the San and Dniester' and 'compensated, to some extent, for the failures we had suffered in East Prussia'.[33] Finally, the Grand Duke had a victory to his name. He dashed off a suitably ebullient telegram to his commanders congratulating them on their 'glorious deeds' but warning them that the 'most heroic efforts' would still be required over the coming weeks.[34]

With each passing day, more Russian troops arrived in theatre. By the first week of September, their strength on the southern front had risen to thirty-six divisions (allowing the formation of a new Ninth Army) against just twenty battered Austro-Hungarian divisions. The Habsburgs were now caught in a fatal embrace with an opponent superior in almost every respect, and, even more worryingly, a dangerous gap of over thirty miles had opened up between Dankl's forces south of Krasnik and Auffenberg's Fourth Army at Rawa Ruska, raising the possibility that Conrad's armies would be defeated in detail.[35] On the day that Lemberg had fallen, General Ivanov issued new orders to his army commanders preparing them for what he hoped would be the 'final defeat' of the enemy. While Brusilov would occupy the line of the Dniester south of Lemberg, 'the armies of generals Lechitsky, Evert, Plehve, and Ruzski must relentlessly keep watch over the enemy located between the Vistula and the Bug: they must prevent them from retreating, force them to fight and inflict defeat upon them, joining up to throw the enemy back to the Vistula'.[36]

Russian forces had recovered quickly from their initial setbacks i Galicia. Although casualties had been heavy and shortages of ammunition were beginning to bite, the Russian campaign was showing quality akin to the mythical 'steamroller' that had so haunted th pre-war European imagination. General Plehve's Fifth Army, whic had been badly mauled at Komarów, had re-formed and its cavalr were beginning to probe into the yawning gap in the Austr Hungarian line. On 6 September, Plehve fell upon Auffenberg exposed left flank, beginning a series of desperate actions that would later be known as the Battle of Rawa Ruska. Austrian troops were able to hold on to their positions, particularly in wooded areas where shellfire was less effective, but everywhere else the superiority of Russian guns was again noticeable. 'At sunrise, artillery fire of all calibres begins on our lines', recorded a Habsburg cavalryman. 'An unearthly sound. Our battery division, close behind us on horseback, retaliates with all its might. But the Russians are far, far superior. Their heavy shells plough into the fields; the trenches burst open, loosening the soil; explosives stream through the air; the clods hit our ears, covering everything with fine dust, while the repulsive stench of the explosives takes our breath away.'[37]

By 9 September, after three days of see-sawing combat, attack followed by counter-attack, Conrad's two northern armies, First and Fourth, were teetering on the brink of collapse. Outnumbered, their flanks menaced by Russian cavalry, they had no choice but to give ground, abandoning scores of guns and leaving the field to the victors, who marched forward with ever-growing confidence. The sight of the abandoned Habsburg positions was terrible: 'piles of human and animal corpses, entire blocks of burning buildings, the crackle of bursting cartridges, the wailing of horses, wounded and abandoned in great numbers – all this along with the heavy, suffocating air, made a disheartening impression'.[38] Although *Stavka* was still concerned about the fighting around Lemberg, with Third and Eighth Armies having been under heavy attack for days, the weakening of the enemy's northern flank offered the perfect opportunity to round up Habsburg units and bring about the decisive moment of the campaign, if only Russian forces could cut off the Austrian retreat. On 10 September, General Ivanov's Chief of Staff, Alekseev, telephoned Brusilov and told him that it would be of 'great benefit to the Motherland' if Eighth Army could just hold firm, and that the fruits of its 'heroic efforts' would be reaped by the other armies.[39]

With the Austrian lines beginning to buckle, Conrad tried to get nearer the front, one of the few occasions he would do so during the war. Accompanied by Archduke Friedrich and Archduke Karl (Franz Joseph's great-nephew and the heir to the throne), he visited Third

Army's area of operations on 10 September, driving out to the town of Grodek, only to encounter a scene of chaos. 'Trains, transports of wounded soldiers, prisoner of war convoys, everything covered in thick dust, ammunition parks, camped troops. Initially muffled and incoherent, later the noise of the battlefield grew louder', he noted. 'Shelling, rifle fire, the intermittent crackling of machine guns. In the firmament, the white explosive clouds of shrapnel . . .' When they got to Grodek, they were met with grisly scenes. The town was burnt to the ground. Six bodies had been left hanging in the main square. 'Two for betraying the enemy, the others for robbing dead and wounded troops on the battlefield . . . Archduke Friedrich followed these new developments with a cold calmness; Archduke Karl with youthful interest. He was courageous and fearless, just as I always found him to be on similar occasions later on.'[40]

Conrad was taken to the highest point on the battlefield, from where he peered through his binoculars, scanning the long expanse of countryside, the ground muddied by the movement of thousands of troops, hearing the rumble of gunfire on the wind. Even though he clung to the dwindling hope that his great battle of manoeuvre and encirclement could be completed, the terrible news from his northern flank, where Dankl and Auffenberg were faced with disaster, forced his hand. At 5.30 p.m. the following day, 11 September, he finally bowed to the inevitable and ordered his armies to retreat behind the San river. 'The actions of the Second and Third Armies had not resulted in a widely effective and resounding decision', he recalled. 'On the contrary, the left wing of the Fourth Army was under serious threat and there was concern that the invasion of two Russian corps could have catastrophic consequences for the Fourth Army. This in turn would impact the Third and Second Armies and drive the main body of the Imperial and Royal forces away from Western Galicia.' He was determined to prevent this at all costs and knew that he must play for time and keep his armies intact: 'the battle would be aborted and the armies would retreat behind the San'.[41] This moment of failure, when all his plans lay in ruins, left the usually confident Chief of the General Staff bereft. It was fitting that on 12 September, as AOK left Przemyśl to take up new quarters at

Neu-Sandec, about ninety miles to the west, it rained heavily, the sky burdened by dark clouds.

The Habsburg Army would never be the same again. Of the 900,000 men who had marched north to face General Ivanov's Southwest Front, fewer than two thirds reached the San. In four weeks of campaigning, perhaps as many as 250,000 soldiers were killed or wounded and another 100,000 taken prisoner, with losses falling particularly heavily upon long-serving regular officers who could not easily be replaced. Leading their men from the front, often riding up and down the lines in plain sight of the enemy, Habsburg officers were easily spotted and easily killed.[42] While the staff at AOK congratulated themselves on such valour and courage, the long trail of shattered regiments streaming away from the line told another story: one of disorganization, hopelessness and terror. 'Train convoys of all military branches blocked the streets for miles', recorded one witness. 'The infantry had been marching along the fields next to the streets so as not to get caught up in the chaos. All the languages of the monarchy could be heard screeching in a wild cacophony of voices; the drivers struck each other with their whips, horse-mounted train commanders vented their frustration with repeated shots from their pistols. Hundreds of broken and bullet-ridden wagons lay in the trenches, alongside bloated horse carcasses and the corpses of soldiers.'[43]

AOK now began urgently to look for German support. Archduke Friedrich had written to the Kaiser as early as 2 September requesting an offensive out of Silesia, while reminding him of Germany's promise to send aid after the defeat of France. The Kaiser, unimpressed by such special pleading, dismissed it angrily, telling the Austro-Hungarian military liaison officer, Josef Stürgkh, that his 'small army' had fought off twelve enemy corps, several of which had been completely destroyed. 'You can't ask more of her than what she has achieved.'[44] Such an attitude would only become more pronounced as Austria–Hungary became even less able to mount independent operations. Stürgkh found himself an outsider at OHL, struggling to pick up information on how the war in the west was unfolding and

increasingly aware of the fundamentally different perspectives on strategy held by the two allies: between Moltke's relentless focus on the Western Front and Conrad's obvious preoccupation with Russia. 'Our federal relationship was subjected to an extreme test of endurance during the first few weeks of war', he later admitted. 'It prevailed. However, there is no doubt that the relationship between the two army commanders was infused with a creeping poison, with distrust and resentment on one side, and anger at the disappointment and dismissive doubts on the other.'[45]

Moltke was not destined to stay in his post for much longer. The campaign in France had started well, but the German Army had been outflanked and counter-attacked in a series of brutal battles along the Marne river between 5 and 10 September, bringing the Schlieffen Plan to a shuddering halt. Moltke had found the burden of command too much and been relieved of his duties on 14 September, replaced by the Prussian Minister of War, Erich von Falkenhayn. Although Falkenhayn had forged a good relationship with the Kaiser, who admired his robust self-confidence, he was not well liked within the General Staff because he had no claim to the position on grounds of seniority (being only 53 years of age) and was decried as a prickly individual, too independent and difficult for such an esteemed role.[46] Despite the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, Falkenhayn was instructed to renew the assault in the west, drawing forces from his left flank and redeploying them in a major offensive towards the Belgian town of Ypres and the Channel ports, aiming to drive the Allies into the sea and then resume the advance on Paris. As for the Eastern Front, he was unsure. He knew that support had to be given to the Austrians, but how this was to be done was, in his words, 'not easy to answer'.[47]

One of Moltke's final acts as Chief of the General Staff was to authorize the deployment of two corps to East Prussia after the action at Gumbinnen. Although these units arrived too late to be of use at Tannenberg, they were a welcome reinforcement when Eighth Army turned its attention to Rennenkampf's First Army, which was now the only sizeable Russian force left on German soil. OHL informed Hindenburg of the arrival of the two new corps on 31 August, ordering him to 'clear East Prussia of Rennenkampf's army